

## **The Great Unsolved Mysteries of Canadian History: Using a web-based archives to teach history.**

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### **Abstract**

Over the past few years, there has been a growing trend in the use of primary documents, those original historical documents used by historians, to teach history in high school and even elementary classrooms. This article uses the author's experience of designing a web-based history education project, The Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History project ([www.canadianmysteries.ca](http://www.canadianmysteries.ca)) to explore some of the promise and problems of using primary documents to teach history. The article suggests that this approach not only makes history more interesting to students, but it does so by drawing students into the processes of critical and imaginative thinking needed to 'do' history.

Over the past few years, there has been a growing trend in the use of primary documents, those original historical documents used by historians, to teach history in high school and even elementary classrooms. Whether history educators believe that the analysis of primary documents does a better job at teaching the kinds of critical enquiry and historical thinking that are at the heart of history education, or whether they believe that this approach is simply more interesting to students, teachers are using primary documents more often in their classrooms as they encourage students to "DO" history (Wineburg, 1999; Seixas 1993; Sandwell, 2003; Osborne, 2004).

Since 1995, John Lutz (a historian at the University of Victoria), and myself (a historian now teaching in a faculty of education at the University of Toronto) have been involved in an on-line history education project that has tried to both encourage the use of primary documents in the teaching of Canadian history, and to alleviate some of the problems associated with it. Working with Dr. Peter Gossage, now the third co-director of our project, we have created a series of documents-based websites called collectively The Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History ([www.canadianmysteries.ca](http://www.canadianmysteries.ca)). This article describes some of the reasoning behind our decision to teach Canadian history through this documents-based approach. After a discussion of the philosophical and pedagogical background to the sites, I will present an

overview of lesson plans that provide some examples from one of the Teachers' Guides to demonstrate just how these theories are translated into practical lessons that are helping to change the way history is taught.

## **The big idea**

Everybody loves a mystery. And the work of historians resembles that of detectives in many respects. Like detectives, historians sift through evidence in order to build convincing interpretations about some aspect or aspects of the past. Unfortunately, it is this very process of building historical knowledge that is so often missing in "school history" (Sandwell, 2003, Seixas, 2003). Teachers tend to represent history as a series of facts to be memorized and given back to the teacher in a slightly altered form, while historians generally understand history instead as a series of interpretations built up, evaluated and argued for in the context of what other people have already argued. John Lutz and I decided to introduce history students to the more delightful, contested, evidence-based and interpretive aspects of history by creating the website "Who Killed William Robinson? Race, Justice and Settling the Land." This website presents students with some brief contextual materials about the "mystery", and the place and times in which it occurred, but most of the site is comprised of hundreds of primary documents – letters, government reports, photographs, maps, newspaper reports – about the mystery surrounding the death of William Robinson.

Here is the mystery described in a nutshell: Between December 1867 and December 1868, a small rural community in colonial British Columbia (Salt Spring Island) was the scene of three brutal, seemingly unconnected murders. All of the victims were members of the island's African American community, and Aboriginal people were widely blamed for all of the deaths. This African American community had fled persecution and slavery in California in 1858, but the murders in 1868-9 fractured the community and drove many away. Many of Salt Spring Island's African American community returned to the United States which was more congenial to them after the Civil War had brought an end to slavery. An Aboriginal man, Tschuanahusset, was convicted and hanged for the murder of one of these men, William Robinson. The trial was to all appearances a sham and afterwards, compelling evidence came to light suggesting that he was not the murderer. The site invites students to re-solve this real-life murder, while the Teachers' Guide that is available to teachers provides units and individual lesson plans that provide more guidance for using the primary documents that make up the bulk of the site.

To our surprise, the website was a great success after its launch in the late 1990s, demonstrating to us that teachers were keen to use primary documents to teach history, and that there was a real shortage of such materials for teachers. Although we had originally designed it for use in first year university survey courses, it was, and is, used extensively in high school classrooms, and not just in western Canada but across Canada and the United States. This site, which has been used in over 40 universities/colleges and 100 high schools, has won the NAWEB (North American Web) Award for the best educational site in North America in 2002 and the 2003 MERLOT Award for Exemplary Online Learning Resources in History ([www.merlot.org](http://www.merlot.org)).

In 2003, we decided to expand the project. Working with University of Sherbrooke historian Dr. Peter Gossage we received funding from the Canadian Content Online Program (CCOP) of the Canadian Heritage Ministry to move ahead with Phase Two of the project, including two new mysteries "The Cruel Stepmother: the Aurore Gagnon Case," (Peter Gossage,

Research Director) and "Nobody Knows His Name: Klatssasin and the Chilcotin Massacre" (John Lutz, Research Director) to complement the pilot "Who Killed William Robinson?".

Although virtually unknown in English Canada, Aurore Gagnon is an icon of Quebec popular culture. Known universally in Quebec as 'Aurore, L'enfant martyre', she was a twelve-year-old girl whose tragic death in February, 1920 became a *cause célèbre* in the province. Her father and stepmother faced murder charges for the neglect and abuse that ultimately killed her, leaving over fifty welts and scars on her body. Although 'who' – the father or the stepmother – was responsible for Aurore's death remains an intriguing question, the deeper unsolved mystery surrounding Aurore's story must be framed in terms of 'why'. Why did this poor, rural couple behave so brutally towards a twelve-year-old girl in the first place? And why has this story resonated for so long in Quebec? In ensuing decades, the events surrounding her murder were interpreted by theatre troupes, novelists, and the filmmaker Jean-Yves Bigras, whose 1951 melodrama *La petite Aurore l'enfant martyre* etched a version of this domestic tragedy in to the collective memory of a generation of *Québécois* and *Québécoises*.

The third website in the Great Mysteries project, *Nobody Knows His Name: Klatssasin and the Chilcotin Massacre*, looks at a crucial but nationally unknown war between the TSILHQOT'IN (Chilcotin) people and the Colony of British Columbia, in 1864. Who did it is only part of the mystery here. Klatssasin, whose name literally means, "We Do Not Know His Name" was hanged with a number of others including his 17 year old son for the death of a road building crew, a team of packers and the only settler in the area. The mystery lies in asking why the Chilcotin launched their attack, and in deciding who won the Indian War that followed.

The overall multi-year goal of this project is to provide teachers and students in high schools, colleges and universities with 13 websites, each an archives of primary historical documents and supporting resources about different unsolved mysteries in Canadian history. As students work their way through the mysteries, they are engaging the major themes in Canadian history, learning about all the regions of Canada, and the major ethnic groups in the country. Students are also developing the complex analytical and critical skills of historians, identifying, selecting and evaluating the 'evidence' left to us from the past, and incorporating it into a coherent narrative framework of description and explanation. Each of the new sites is now available in French and English. All the sites are accompanied by teachers' guides synchronized as much as possible with provincial education department teaching outcomes.

### **Pedagogical Orientation**

As we have already noted, these educational websites "work" by providing students with the opportunity to use primary documents from history to build a meaningful and reasoned historical interpretation. These sites are, therefore, designed to simulate the kind of critical thinking necessary for primary archival research. The sites are not written as a "story" with a beginning and end, much to the consternation of students, but rather are a collection of documents and images which relate to the particular mystery and to the social history of Canada more generally. It is up to students to provide the explanatory framework that can best make sense of the documents. The sites are not meant to be used as "stand alone" teaching tools. Instead, working with the teacher and their classmates, students are required to build their own stories around the incident. More junior students require more direction about where to look than others.

All of the sites work on four main levels. The level to which instructors push their students will depend on the abilities of the group being taught. The first two levels are accessible to grade school as well as junior university students. The third level is probably appropriate for university students at a junior and senior level. The final level is aimed at upper-level undergraduates and graduate students.

#### *Level One: Reading and Understanding Primary Documents*

The first level is the most obvious. This site brings ready access to a wide variety of primary documents about particular episodes in Canadian history. Obtaining these documents is usually a time-consuming and difficult process, even for skilled researchers with the time and resources to travel to several archival repositories. For students with little experience and limited access, the examination of primary documents is practically impossible. Yet, it is the personal and immediate nature of primary sources like letters, diaries and newspapers that bring the past alive for most of us. To assist students, the documents have been transcribed. The first level at which the site works, therefore, is the exposure to a wide variety of the raw materials and some basic skills used by historians. Ideally, it will excite interest in doing more historical research.

#### *Level Two: Exploring the Social History of Colonial Canadian Society*

At the next level, students acquire a basic understanding of some of the major elements of life in Canadian society at the time of each mystery. Given the right questions and learning environments, this information comes easily to students as they seek and weigh the evidence surrounding each mystery. In their attempt to solve the mystery, they come to grips with the historical antecedents of current issues such as racism, social violence, inter-ethnic conflict, judicial independence, Eurocentric colonial law, economic change, English/French relations, and settler society and aboriginal resistance to it. In solving the mysteries, they examine the real lives of ordinary people who lived in the mid-nineteenth century, down to the details of everyday life. The localized nature of this study brings the period to life in a way that is impossible when the scale of reference is larger. To consolidate this information, students can be presented with specific factual questions, or higher-level interpretative questions which require them to use each site to find specific answers.

#### *Level Three: Doing History*

At the third level, students are drawn into the work of doing history. The students go through a number of obvious stages as they learn about this practice. At first, each site seems novel and even amusing to student surfers. Quickly, however, they are confronted with the complexities and difficulties of doing history. The students will encounter, probably for the first time, evidence that is not laid out in a linear/narrative form for them. They realize, painfully, that history is a process of creating their own narrative from complex and often contradictory bits of evidence, all of which must be evaluated according to *particular* standards and used in *particular* ways. Merely asking them to describe "what happened" forces them to evaluate evidence and make choices about what they consider most reliable. At this level, students are "doing" or "making" history: they are using their own critical skills to judge significance, evaluate evidence and form an argument.

It is at this point that students can benefit most from the classroom discussion and workshops that are integral to using this site as a teaching tool. Barring this, an on-line discussion group moderated by an instructor could be used as a substitute. Students will be in a position to discuss the minutiae of the case, and of the lives of many of the individuals associated with it. They can be asked to defend their interpretations and in so doing must reveal their strategies for discriminating among contradictory evidence. Instructors/moderators can, at this point,

draw out the successful interpretive strategies and foreground them for those students who used them unconsciously or who did not have the skills to judge at all. Students can be encouraged to develop a schema for analyzing historical evidence and present that to their discussion group.

Since students will follow different research strategies and so view different kinds of evidence, they will inevitably come to different conclusions about what the issues "really" were in each of the mysteries. Either through role-playing, class discussion or written assignments students will have to consolidate their understanding of the murder and its historical context in arguing for their interpretation. In this way, this telling of this murder, and series of murders, reverses the logic of standard texts and teaching formats. Too often a text, like a lecture, raises a topic and then attempts to invoke "rhetorical closure" by offering one interpretation as the most convincing and authoritative. By contrast, this format is open-ended, designed to provoke discussion about major questions such as racism, justice, or economic relations, in a specific historical and geographical situation, as students solve the mystery. Instead of answers, students are given the criteria by which they can make sense out of the past.

#### *Level Four: What is History and How Can We Know It?*

For more sophisticated students, the website also operates at a fourth, or historiographical/epistemological level. Since students will have looked at the same information base and much of the same basic evidence and yet come to different conclusions, they can be introduced to questions about the status of historical knowledge and the interpretation of facts. If they come to a variety of conclusions, they can discuss the interpretative and tentative nature of "History" and the importance of understanding the location of the historian as the mediator. If instructors wish, they can introduce post-structuralist critiques of history and the rejoinders, using the documents about the murder of William Robinson contained in this site. At this level, the Website allows students to explore some of the most important theoretical questions in the discipline.

### **Lesson Plans for Secondary Students**

The following chart provides an overview of one of the Unit Plans contained in the Teachers' Guide for the "Who Killed William Robinson?" website, written by historians Ruth Sandwell, John Lutz, together with teachers Heidi Bohaker, Tina Davidson and Grace Ventura, and history educators Janet N. Mort and Mia Riemers. As you can see, these lesson plans, directed at a junior secondary level class, attempt to teach students about the nature and uses of primary documents, leading them into the questions of interpretations of evidence in the context of larger issues of history and historical interpretation. In the culminating activity, students enact a re-trial, using the skills and evidence they have uncovered in their research on the site.

As John Myers has carefully argued in his article in this special issue, if students are really going to learn a new way of learning and understanding history by using primary documents, assessment strategies must be carefully designed to assess the skills, techniques and kinds of knowledge that the site is designed to teach. History teachers tend to focus their assessments on the factual 'products' of historical knowledge, a much easier task than designing assessments to measure the more complex processes of creating historical knowledge. But teachers will need to refine and develop their assessment strategies if they are going to convince students that history is more than 'just the facts.' They will want to assess how well

students can select evidence, and how well they use it to construct historical knowledge. To answer these questions, students will need to understand what makes some evidence better than others, and how much is enough to make a convincing argument in favour of a particular interpretation.

Assessment strategies must, in addition, test how well students are able to contextualize their specific evidence within broader themes and issues raised by other historians, and at a level that is appropriate to students' abilities and knowledge. Assessment strategies appropriate to each of the lessons listed below can be found in the detailed lesson plans for this site, at [www.canadianmysteries.ca](http://www.canadianmysteries.ca), while John Myers' article in this collection provides a broad discussion of the practical and theoretical issues that need to be taken into account when using primary documents to teach history.

<b>Key Question: Who Killed William Robinson?</b>		
<b>LESSON TITLE</b>	<b>TIME NEEDED</b>	<b>OVERVIEW</b>
Preparatory Lesson	1 class lesson (75 minutes)	In this introduction to historical documents, the class comes up with a list of the kinds of documents (primary sources) that historians of the future might use to make inferences about "our" lives hundreds of years from now. Students then select the three primary sources that they think will best describe their own lives for future historians, and use a data chart to explain why
Lesson 1: Who Killed William Robinson?	2 classes	In this lesson, students are first given an overview of the murder of William Robinson, and introduced to the terms Primary and Secondary Sources. They are then asked to read a selection of documents (primary sources) relating to the incident, and assess the information they contain and the point of view they represent. If Tshuanahusset was not guilty of murdering Robinson, who might be? In the second part of the exercise, students develop a timeline for the events of the crime.
Lesson 2: Historical Contexts	3 classes	In this three-class lesson, students work in groups to explore one of six areas that provides a broader historical context for understanding the crime. Each group will create a poster that represents their research, and present it to the class on one of the following topics: Settler Society on Salt Spring Island, Crime and Punishment in late 19th century Vancouver Island and British Columbia, Aboriginal Issues and Aboriginal/Non-aboriginal relations on the west coast in the 19th century, the larger Canadian historical context and the American (particularly West Coast) historical context.
Lesson 3: Criminal Law-	2 classes	In this two-class activity, students are introduced to the basic concepts of criminal law and given an

Then and Now		opportunity to explore Canada's criminal law tradition. Students are asked to identify the similarities in customs today with those in the past, as well as changes.
Lesson 4: Reading Between the Lines: Listening for Other Voices	2 classes	In this lesson, students learn to use critical skills for historical and legal investigation. In the first part, students learn how to interrogate a document for factual clues about the William Robinson murder. In the second part, students gather in groups to assess the quality and suitability of their documents to the investigation of Robinson's murder.
Lesson 5: Thinking it Through	1 class	In this in-class writing activity, students refine their communication skills as they think through and summarize the evidence either in a newspaper-style article or in a report on inconsistencies in the trial testimony.
Lesson 6: Taking it to Court (mock trial and written paper).	4 classes	In this culminating activity, students participate in a mock trial. They use this information and the documents on the website as a whole to create a dramatisation of the court case that will settle the matter, assigning roles and writing scripts for a final performance in the last class. As an option or an extension activity, students can write and submit individually their finding on the case.

## Conclusion

Over the past few years, history teachers have drawn increasingly on primary documents to teach history. While teachers and students enjoy the engagement with the past provided by this kind of active learning, history educators argue that this critical examination of historical texts more closely resembles what history is - the ongoing interpretation of evidence about the past - than the "memorize and regurgitate" model that continues to influence history education across the country. The Great Unsolved Mysteries of Canadian History project was designed to provide the historical documents, or evidence, that teachers and students need if they are to "do" history. The Teachers' Guides for the sites help to articulate just what is different about this approach to history, and to provide teachers with the support they need as they steer students through this extended exercise in critical thinking and historical contextualization. In our experience with students and teachers using the site, the sites not only make history more interesting, but they help give students a deeper knowledge of our society, past and present, and a deeper understanding of how that knowledge is obtained.

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